

### “Apologia Pro Sermone.”<sup>1</sup>

I VENTURE to begin on a word of criticism. Whenever men speak, especially in a Society like this, about church worship, they are apt to count it necessary to pit one part of the service against another, and to deprecate the attention given to the sermon as compared with the devotional parts of the service. Now that kind of talk always leaves me more than a little uneasy. For one thing, it offends the historic sense. The religious address sprang up too early and too spontaneously in the Christian Church to be anything except native to its genius. It has also survived many hard things said about it, and it is apt to revive, when religious life is quickened.

Besides, a great deal which can be said against the sermon bears quite as strongly against many of our Scripture lessons, which no one would dream of lessening. In the Old Testament all the prophetic literature, more than half the Psalter, and all the wisdom books are sermons. In my judgment most of the historical books were intended to teach not history but religion. In the New Testament all the epistles, our Lord's parables and addresses to His disciples are direct addresses. And the Acts of the Apostles are the record of how men carried the Gospel of the Kingdom to their world. All these are much better sermons than any which we can preach. But that, of course, is not the question. The question is as to the place for the religious address, whether good or bad. And I have always the uneasy sense that any conception of a religious service which hesitates over the place of the sermon is sure to get into difficulty over the Scripture lessons.

Clearly there is some underlying confusion here. And I suggest that one source of the trouble may arise from the fact that we have not defined or kept before us what a public religious service is meant to be. We are apt to slip about between different ideas of what it is intended to do for us, and what we seek to do in it. We find ourselves speaking about the devotional part and the teaching part as though these served no common purpose. Yet there ought to be some common end which is served by it

<sup>1</sup> An address to the Church Service Society, 27th May 1930.

all. And this should be wide enough to include not only our Presbyterian service, but the ritual of our brethren in the Roman obedience.

I venture to suggest that the definition which explains the origin and also explains the tough persistence of public worship, is that it is essentially an act of faith in all its parts. Men come together because they believe in God through Jesus Christ. They would not come unless they believed. Coming, as they do, for this specific reason, they bear witness to Him in whom they believe. They would have nothing in common in this particular act were it not for their faith in Him. And as they bear witness together of Him, their faith is strengthened through their mutual act. They also bear witness to the world, whether it is hostile or merely indifferent, and again their united witness brings new strength. They give Him thanks in praise, because they know what He has been to them. They pray to Him who has promised His presence where two or three are met in His name. All their acts of worship are of one character, when it is recognised that the worshippers combine to acknowledge God whom to know is life.

The testimony, whether of Scripture or of preaching, has its natural place there. Only the testimony often changes its character. Many men begin—I know I did—with the idea that their task was to preach at their people, telling them with some vehemence of their failures and insisting on their neglected duties. It may come to sound a little crude, when men grow older. But one recognises why older and wiser men bore it from our youth, and I acknowledge that it warms me to hear it again from one of my students. For, however crude it may be, it means that a man is making his act of faith in Him whose mind he seeks to see and whose will he seeks to enforce.

Later one comes to take a humbler note. For life is not so simple as at first it seemed. It has pleased God that a good life should not be easy to find nor the Christian road easy to follow, for the parson as well as for the people. Yet, though the road may be hard to find, the great beacon-lights are always clear. And there can be no security, as there can be no joy, except along the way which the blessed feet have walked before us. Perhaps we learn to be content to hold up again those great lights which have guided so many, and to recall how they prevent much foolish wandering and how their clear shining gives new hope to

those who have wandered. And men make together their act of faith in Him who is the way.

The same element is present in other parts of the service. It accounts, not merely for the popularity, but for the power of many of our hymns. Many of these cannot be described as acts of praise. Can even one half of the hymns in the hymnary be called in strictness praise? They are not even, though many are, prayers in rhythmical form. Take such a hymn as—

Jesus, Thou Joy of loving hearts,  
Thou Fount of life, Thou Light of men,  
From the best bliss that earth imparts  
We turn unfilled to Thee again.

That cannot be called either praise or prayer: yet no one would wish it removed from our worship. In it men say quietly and simply what is the secret strength and hope of life to them, without which the world would be very dark. They make their act of faith. Only this time it is not made for them by any representative. They make it together, and are confirmed by making it together. And here I venture to say what may annoy some who, being musical enthusiasts, will count my claim merely Philistine. The music which accompanies these hymns seems to me to owe its place in public worship to the need for some means by which the worshippers may be able in any seemly fashion to combine in their joint act. Probably its origin is to be sought in the much simpler form of the synagogue cantillation. There, too, it served to make seemly and worthy a common act of worship or faith on the part of a body of worshippers. But sometimes, one may dare to whisper, what was meant to be a means to a greater end threatens to become an end in itself.

I have no time to say much about the prayers and the Sacraments. But there is little need. Only this may be said. In a certain way of regarding the matter prayer might be thought to be peculiarly unsuited to a public exercise of religion. It is at once so intimate in its relation to God and so personal in the needs which a man brings. That is so true as to make it also true that no worshipper knows the full worth of prayer who has never practised that prayer in secret which our Lord commanded. What, then, is left for public and united prayer to effect? One great thing, I think. Men come together from this earthbound life, which is so fascinating, so en-

grossing and yet so unsatisfactory. They are conscious of great needs, which are different according to their conditions, but which are one in this, that they witness to their being more than the creatures of time. They cannot live a full life without more than their world can supply. And together they pray to Him in whose presence they believe and whose care for them they trust. They become conscious of that greater world of the unseen and the eternal, and conscious of it as their home. They have the sense then, not of having received an answer to a specific petition, but of having reached up to One to whom all these are known. They have the sense of how—to use the older liturgy—underneath are the everlasting arms. Their souls find God, and are heartened by the knowledge that He will never fail to give what He counts necessary to them.

Surely this again is a great act of faith. Indeed, it is the greatest. To enter into the presence and to lay hold on the power of the eternal world which is so near our world of sense is the Christian triumph. And so I return on that with which I ventured to begin. Much of what I have suggested to you may seem to be no more than an *apologia pro sermone*, and so a little apart from the direct aim of our Society. But a society which aims at impressing on all who conduct public services the significance and the value of its devotional side can greatly serve the Church.

ADAM C. WELCH.

---